

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

251255Z Aug 05

UNCLAS MADRID 003044

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/WE AND OES/ETC; USDA FOR FOREST SERVICE;
INTERIOR FOR NATIONAL PARKS SERVICE;

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: SENV SOCI SP

SUBJECT: FOREST FIRES AND DROUGHT RAVAGE SPAIN

¶11. Spain is suffering its second worse year in the last decade in terms of total hectares lost to forest fires. From January 1 through August 14, 2005, Spain lost 107,524 square hectares to forest fires. The 1995-2005 average for this same period was 79,621. Thus, the current year is 32 percent above the decade average. The worst year in the last decade was 2003, when Spain lost 125,388 square hectares to forest fires over the same period. The areas hardest hit have been northeast Spain, followed by the country's central regions. The Mediterranean coastline has been least affected.

¶12. The death of 11 firefighters on July 17 in Guadalajara and the total of 15 deaths during the summer fire season have ensured that fires have stayed in the headlines. The deaths have prompted calls for the government to reform firefighting practices and change land management practices. Current land management regulations work to encourage some land owners to deliberately start fires in order to gain permission (and at times government subsidies) to rezone their land to permit development. The government is also considering increasing both prison sentences and the prosecution rate for arsonists. (NOTE: Currently, deliberately set fires rarely result in prosecutions and those few that are brought to trial generally receive insignificant punishments. END NOTE.)

¶13. The Spanish Congress is scheduled to debate this fall a new "Forest Law" ("Ley de Montes") that would include reforms of fire fighting and land management regulations, as well as adjustments to the criminal code (as it pertains to arson). The draft law includes efforts to increase arson prosecutions and sentences and would stipulate a 30 year minimum waiting period before land lost to forest fires could be re-zoned. Given the 15 deaths (which took place after the government tabled the draft law), most observers expect Congress to attach to this law a more general reform of fire fighting practices.

¶14. Spanish Environment Minister Cristina Narbona has publicly linked the fires to Spain's ongoing drought. Reservoirs are currently at 43.6 percent of their capacity (down from 50 percent in June), and the government just authorized opening 16 "emergency wells" in the Murcia and Alicante regions, where reservoirs are at 20.7 percent of capacity. Narbona has underscored Spain's needs to make greater efforts to limit water use and that raising water prices is an essential element of any such strategy. Total 2005 rainfall in Spain is the lowest since records began to be kept.

¶15. Once the outline of the expected Forest Law becomes clear, Embassy Madrid plans on contacting relevant Spanish Government authorities to explore greater fire fighting cooperation. This summer's fires revealed that Spain's firefighting practices are relatively outdated compared to the U.S. and other major EU states. If Spain is serious about improving its firefighting capabilities, we hope to be able to help them do it.

AGUIRRE